

Icon Speedway

John Clute

but her hips were moving, slowly, and she began to run her hands up and down the air before her. Now and again she moved a leg slightly, bending out at the knee, easily, to the music. Then her hands moved, one down, one stroking the air between throat and belly level, up and down. She looked at me then, and smiled, and I blushed a hot, deep red.

Here, she was saying, *this is what I'll do to you when I take you to bed.*

I couldn't bear it, I wanted her so much, but I couldn't turn away: I stood there, trembling, helpless.

The music changed, and a woman with long hair started dancing at Nadia, who laughed and danced back, ignoring me. I wanted to kill that woman with long hair. I pushed my way through the crowds and out an emergency side-door exit into the parking lot.

The night tasted of cars driven too fast and braked too hard, of beer and fragile laughter, of one o'clock in the morning. The sky was dark and thick with thunderclouds. There was a flash in the west, and a low rumble. Sultry, restless weather.

Music blared loud and was cut off again as someone stepped out into the night. I didn't turn, but tilted my head back to watch the stormcloud bunching and heaving like overheated muscle.

A hand touched the back of my neck. Nadia. The hand slid around to stroke my throat. "Let's go," she said in my ear, and, god help me, I went, just like that, without telling Talulah, without even *thinking* of telling Talulah, without thinking of the court case or Nadia's admonitions not to trust her. I walked to my car, her hand still on my neck, without saying a word, without thinking at all.

The rain started on the way back to my apartment, fat ripe drops. I wanted to drive fast, but Nadia laid a hand on my thigh and I kept the speedometer exactly at thirty. No dark sedan followed us. My blood felt like molten metal.

At the apartment building, we still didn't speak. Our breathing matched, heavy and rhythmic, as we climbed the five flights of stairs. When we reached the top, Nadia stroked the back of my neck with one hand and tapped in my lock code with the other. We went in.

The power was still off, but the bed sheets shone sodium yellow in the glow of streetlights reflected from rain-wet streets. Nadia watched, unspeaking, her face in shadow, as I undressed. I felt as though I was stripping off my history, my inhibitions, my safety. This was right here, right now, like playing with fulminate of mercury. I didn't know what to expect. All I knew was that I wanted her to run a fingertip through the sweat in the small of my back. I wanted her to hold me with those strong arms and iron legs, I wanted her breath hot on my face as her lips came closer. I wanted her, wanted her, wanted her.

Hours later, Nadia stood naked by the open window, watching the night. I lay across the bed, fascinated by her, drunk with her, surfeited, stuffed tight as a drum with sweat and sex and the memory of skin between gentle teeth, of strong fingers, and her belly on my back and arm around my hips.

When the storm had been over the roof over Nadia over me over the bed, the rain had been so heavy it had leaked through the old roof tiles, seeping down inside the walls, mixing with the plaster made of red Georgia clay, making the whitewashed walls weep blood.

That had been hours ago. The storm was gone now, and all that remained of the rain were dripping gutters and the glisten on the treetops in Piedmont Park. The streets were quiet; it was not long before dawn.

"At this time of night," she said, "I can almost believe it would be possible to fall out of a high window and be buoyed up by the darkness itself, that we could fly." She turned back to look at me, and the breath caught in my throat. "Do you believe in flying?"

Yes. But I couldn't speak. She had made me fly for hours; I had soared. I couldn't see her face, but I knew she smiled. She moved a step towards the bed, and though the streetlights reflected from below turned her eye the mad marigold of a hawk's, and I was scared, my blood roared hot under my skin, and the tendons running inside my thighs tightened in anticipation. She laughed, a low double-cream laugh. "Perhaps you would like me to come a little closer?"

I woke up the next day, alone. The window was closed. I sat up. Had I dreamed it? But the walls were streaked with plaster blood, the sheets were torn, and the room smelled of her, my hands and my hair and belly smelled of her. I laughed out loud: pleased with myself; a little ashamed; exhausted.

There was a yellow sticky note on the TV screen: *Three o'clock, in the park.*

A typically Nadia note. No *Please* or *Thank you* or *Can you make it?*

The power was still off and I was showering in the dark when someone knocked on the door. I didn't much feel like getting out all wet, so I ignored the tapping and turned the spray up to full force. If they knocked again, I wouldn't hear it.

I soaped myself absently, shivering as I remembered Nadia's hands, the way she had touched the back of my neck and said, "Let's go."

How was I going to persuade Talulah to let me keep my job? I couldn't believe I'd just walked out like that, without telling her.

I sighed and rinsed off, pulled a towel off the rack. I needed that job. Perhaps Talulah would believe a sudden case of ptomaine poisoning, a night in the emergency room... I padded through into the main room, towelling myself dry.

There was a woman staring at the stained wall.

Obviously she had just let herself in: the door was still swinging closed. She spun around when she heard me. Crooked Finger.

"Oh," she said, looking at me, then the wall. "Then it's not..." She shut up, but not before I heard the relief in her voice.

I stood there, naked and confused. "What's not what?"

She sidled toward the door.

"Wait," I said. Some of my shock was wearing off, but not the confusion. "What are you doing here?" She opened the door. I noticed the gloves. "Wait just a goddamned minute —"

Into the pot of many colours of the sf of the latter days, once more Paul J. McAuley dips a sly palette, but this time he pulls out his thumb. His fourth novel, **Red Dust** (Gollancz, £15.99), which is his best by far, takes place on a Mars as full of reflections of the fictions of the past as any Christmas ornament, and tells a story whose profound (though ultimately subversive) orthodoxy serves as a remarkably sustained homage to the sf tale which lay at the heart of the genre in America for half a century. It is the story of the orphan who becomes king, and changes the world, into Camelot or Trantor. It is the story that Gene Wolfe — McAuley parodies him with loving intensity in a couple of passages — transfigured into the tale of Severian in *The Book of the New Sun*, at which point it was possible to think the story could not be told any longer in a new voice; certainly not (as in this book) in the guise of a Western set on Mars, starring Billy the Kid.

Red Dust, which is set half a millennium hence on a Mars long under Chinese hegemony, is indeed new only in the dazzlement of the web of trope it quotes. It is the story of a very young man named Wei Lee, whose nickname is Billy, and to whom things happen like magic (as they do in fables). He is haunted by half-memories of his long-dead parents, the mystery of whose disappearance (and true nature) turns out to be pivotal to any understanding of the history of the planet; he crisscrosses Mars on a variety of trusty steeds in search of the knowledge of self which will transform everything, and manages en route to acquire a plethora of enablement icons, all of which turn out to be essential to his quest (and to any understanding of late-genre sf). These icons include an ever-growing cadre of deeply loyal companions; weapons galore; new martial arts; an assortment of virtual-reality eidolons (among them a librarian who searches cyberspace for helpful tidbits); a secret-sharer warrior-sister within the skin (like Severian's Thecla) who turns out to be profoundly that; an aspect of Elvis Presley who abides in virtual reality but who makes live broadcasts throughout the solar system, espousing (as the real Elvis never did) revolution; a pharmacopoeia of "totipotent fullerene viruses" which seed his brain and body with healants, strengtheners, brighteners, enhancers, little Plot Solvents of the Haloed Nanotechnology beaver away like the Neoplatonic angels who comprise molecular space in order to one-bound-free the hero of the various rite-of-passage scrapes and wounds and little deaths to which 1990s godlings are heir before they are permitted to assume the burden of dicing the quick and feasting the dead at the terminus of the book. And the more he

learns, and the more harumscarum seems his course onward, the more it becomes obvious (to us and to those he meets) that his true nature is being unravelled as he travels, that he is a holy innocent or bodhisattva, that his arrival at the goal is inevitable, that the old Emperor/King/Pa/God will be identified and dissolved in a great dying cry down the scars and the screees of epiphany space into Death.

To say all of this is not to mock *Red Dust*. There may be echoes of the innumerable past futures of old sf throughout: Leigh Brackett and all the other creators of the Martian planetary romance; Cordwainer Smith (for "When the People Fell"); Greg Bear (for partials) and Wolfe (for aquastors, here called eidolons, and for chilling segues, which one passage can demonstrate: "Perhaps the Great House was great indeed, its rooms and corridors extending through time as well as space, so that if Lee walked out of this room he might find himself returned to his childhood. And then he had the strange idea that if he walked out into the garden he would find his parents, and for some reason that filled him with terror."). And there may be a powerful sense that McAuley is a full participant — along with Geoff Ryman (whose Consensus he invokes in passing), Ian McDonald and Colin Greenland and Robert Charles Wilson and Kim Stanley Robinson — in the agape of the new sf, whose banquet is the old.

His default imagery may run — like theirs — from Mad Max and cyberpunk and the various enticements of Abyss Frenzy so common to writers at the edge of millennium, on up to the daft totalizing epiphanies which are equally common to last chapters of books crafted in the latter days of genre. And he may indulge in the occasional writers'-workshop-style schtick: for instance, by reversing chapters 68 and 69, and papering over the gap at the beginning of chapter 70, he nicely demonstrates the workshop gimmick which has been coined (today) the Milford Twitch — a Cunning Plan through which the author "hooks" readers by starting a narrative sequence with a brightly-lit flash-forward into *medias res*, but then has to catch up afterwards with a sentence, or a passage, or a chapter of flash-back to set the scene, and then has to jump

over the point where the hook section would have fit, perfectly naturally, in the first place, and then has to start all over a *third* time with *another* sentence or passage which tells readers that what feels to them like a missing section is indeed a missing section. But the Cunning Plan is a passing foible, and the web of echoes is the sea a modern sf writer swims in.

What distinguishes the McAuley of *Red Dust* from the McAuley of the previous books, and from most of his contemporaries, is the glad speed and brio of the telling. It is as though, in this pellmell book, he had at last found his novel voice, the tessitura pace at which he can act out the tale, without grimacing. And this may be essential. It may be the case that *voice*, for Paul J. McAuley, is far more a matter of momentum than for most writers, that until the speed of telling blurs the calculus of rhetoric, he remains a bachelor at the agape, a UK joker grinning too slyly at the papier-maché podiums of the Yanks; slightly flummoxed by the fractal selves the mirror informs on. In *Red Dust*, speed has a further function, too. It's what the filmmaker Norman McLaren famously said about animation. Animation, he said, wasn't a question of "drawings-that-move," but of "movements-that-are-drawn." In *Red Dust*, it isn't a question of icons-that-move, but of a web-of-echoes-that-are-drawn. Who can tell the icon from the tale?

There are passing pleasures as well. The Chinese hegemony grants us a protagonist of a different grain; the Western overlay is performed with love and dispatch; the long-defeated Yankees hilariously occupy, in the main city, what looks very much like Chinatown; Elvis is not quite the usual bloat of gas, though McAuley doesn't quite manage to answer the question so many of us have been asking, timidly, for years, *sotto voce*, of Elvis-invoking contemporary sf writers: *Why Elvis?* Why not any of the hundred or so almost infinitely more interesting composer-performers of the last thirty years? I mean, in one song, "Graceland," even the smooth-faced Paul Simon said and sang more about America and life and death and the future and the past than Elvis did in twenty years of overdose crooning. But the main pleasure is the chase, for *Red Dust* is like a game; but it is better than any game, because it is impossible to lose it.